

FEBRUARY 18, 1982

The weather in the Shortgrass Country has been terrible for the past two weeks. Cold fronts have been stacking up in the Texas Panhandle. Layers of ice on the water troughs mark the passages through here. Scarps of ice around the waterings are days old, and the herders have been barely able to water their stock from one cold blasts to the other.

Feeding is going on at a heavy pace. The volume of cottonseed cubes is such that the atmosphere west of San Angelo has a mealy smell. Around the coffee houses, the pickup beds are showing the overloads. Hombres ganged up inside look like stevedore gangs that have been drawing too much overtime.

In between the storms, we've been marking calves and working sheep. Our roundup strategy has been centered on the feed sack and the pickup horn. This time of year, the cowboy's clothes are so heavily flavored by cottonseed meal that an old cow will follow them in the corral just for the hopes of a lick from their pant's cuffs.

Sheep, unfortunately, aren't as easy to trick as sack broke cattle. They have to be gathered on horseback regardless of the time of the year. Thus, we had some mighty cold rides surrounding and containing the woolies. It was much harder that the cattle work.

Given a choice in the winter, I prefer riding horseback to the pasture over using the modern method of dragging trailers and freighting the men and horses. For one thing, the 15-odd working days of cold weather has chilled these hands to the point that riding in a pickup with them is colder than, being off the ground and on a horse. The cold of their chaps and coats offsets the warmth of the cab. Once they leave the house, they start shaking and trembling like they are going to die from frostbite. I don't like to be in a truck with a bunch of guys that are reenacting an iceberg scene.

Like I keep telling them, cutting ice is an art. Ice wasn't intended to be attacked. Size or strength is no excuse to splatter ice flakes all over their clothes. The most graceful sight I ever saw on TV was that famous football player, Terry Bradshaw skating with his pretty wife on a big show rink up north. Old Terry was so much in love with her and so smooth just a gliding by her side, that I was flat shocked when I read that they'd separated because of incompatibility.

Sometimes I feel clumsy myself on cold days, sitting in this office, bundled up in too many clothes. But that's no excuse to try to finish up my work in a big hurry and make a mess over the office space.

On one specially cold morning, the south wind caused our eyes to water to the point that when we'd be counting sheep, whitecaps were forming in the tears on our lower lids. The old ponies were making that awful scrunching sound on the ice. It was so bad, the shearing crew that I'd hired didn't have one can of beer until the temperature rose into the high 20s.

Spring is going to get a big reception in the Shortgrass Country. Once it comes, its going to take a month to warm these cowhands up to normal. I still watch for that Bradshaw rerun. I can't believe they're divorced. Maybe I heard the wrong report.